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THE GENIUS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

BY JAMES HUNEKER

I

IN these piping days when fiction plays the handmaid or prophet to various propaganda; when the majority of writers are trying to prove something, or acting as vendors of some new-fangled social nostrums; when the insistent drums of the Great God Réclame are bruising human tympani, the figure of Joseph Conrad stands solitary among English novelists as the ideal of a pure and disinterested artist. Amid the clamor of the market-place a book of his is a sea-shell which pressed to the ear echoes the far-away murmur of the sea; always the sea, either as rigid as a mirror under hard, blue skies or shuddering symphonically up some exotic beach. Conrad is a painter doubled by a psychologist; he is the psychologist of the sea—and that is his chief claim to originality, his Peak of Darien. He knows and records its every pulse-beat. His genius has the rich, salty tang of an Elizabethan buccaneer's and the spaciousness of those times. Imagine a Polish sailor who read Flaubert and the English Bible, who bared his head under equatorial large few stars and related his adventures in rhythmic, sonorous, colored prose; imagine a man from a landlocked country who "midway in his mortal life" began writing for the first time and in an alien tongue, and, added to an almost abnormal power of description, possessed the art of laying bare the human soul, not after the meticulous manner of the modern Paul Prys of psychology, but following the larger method of Flaubert, who believed that actions should translate character—imagine these paradoxes and you have partly imagined Joseph Conrad, who has so finely said that "imagination, and not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life."

He has taken the sea-romance, which in the hands of

Smollett, Marryat, Melville, Dana, Clark Russell, Stevenson, Becke, Kipling—in his extraordinary *The Island of Dr. Moreau*—and to its well-worn situations has added not only many novel nuances, but invaded new territory, revealed the obscure atavisms and the psychology lurking behind the mask of the savage, and shown us a world of “kings, demagogues, priests, charlatans, dukes, giraffes, cabinet ministers, bricklayers, apostles, ants, scientists, Kaffirs, soldiers, sailors, elephants, lawyers, dandies, microbes, and constellations of a universe whose amazing spectacle is a moral end in itself.” In his *Reminiscences* Mr. Conrad has told us, with the surface frankness of a Pole, the genesis of his literary career, of *Almayer's Folly*, his first novel, and in a quite casual fashion throws fresh light on that somewhat enigmatic character—reminding me in the juxtaposition of his newer psychologic procedure and the simple old tale, of Wagner's *Venusberg* ballet, scored after he had composed “*Tristan und Isolde*.” But, like certain other great Slavic writers, Conrad has only given us a tantalizing peep into his mental workshop. We rise after finishing the *Reminiscences* realizing that we have read once more romance, in whose half-lights and modest evasions we catch fleeting glimpses of reality. Reticence is a distinctive quality of this author; after all, isn't truth an idea that traverses a temperament? Safer it would be to apply to him the epigraph of Huysmans' “*Marthe*”: “I set down what I see, what I feel, what I have lived, writing as well as I am able, *et voilà tout!*”

That many of his stories were in the best sense “lived” there can be no doubt—he has at odd times confessed it, confessions painfully wrung from him, as he is no friend of the interviewer. The white-hot sharpness of the impressions which he has projected upon paper recalls Henri Taine's dictum: “*les sensations sont des hallucinations vraies.*” Veritable hallucinations are the seascapes and landscapes in the South Sea stories, veritable hallucinations are the quotidian gestures and speech of his anarchists and souls sailing on the winds of noble and sinister passions. For Conrad is on one side an implacable realist. . . . Unforgettable are his delineations of sudden little rivers never charted and their shallow, turbid waters, the somber flux of immemorial forests under the crescent cone of night, and undergrowth overlapping the banks, the tragic chaos of

rising storms, hordes of clouds, sailing low on the horizon, the silhouettes of lazy, majestic mountains, the lugubrious magic of the tropical night, the mysterious drums of the natives, and the darkness that one can taste, smell, feel. What a gulf of incertitudes for white men is evoked for us in vivid, concrete terms. Unforgettable, too, the hallucinated actions of the student Razumov the night Victor Haldin, after launching the fatal bomb, seeks his room, his assistance, in that masterpiece, *Under Western Eyes*. But realist as Conrad is, he is also a poet who knows, as he says himself, that "the power of sound has always been greater than the power of sense." (Reason is a poor halter with which to lead mankind to drink at the well of truth.) He woos the ear with his singing prose as he ravishes the eye with his pictures. In his little-known study of Henry James he wrote: "All creative art is magic, is evocation of the unseen in forms persuasive, enlightening, familiar, and surprising," and finally, "Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing." Often a writer tells us more of himself in criticizing a fellow-craftsman than in any formal esthetic pronouncement. We soon find out the likes and dislikes of Mr. Conrad in this particular essay, and also what might be described as the kelson of his workaday philosophy: "All adventure, all love, every success, is resumed in the supreme energy of [an act] renunciation. It is the utmost limit of our power." No wonder his tutor, half in anger, half in sorrow, exclaimed: "You are an incorrigible, hapless Don Quixote."

I suppose a long list could be made of foreigners who have mastered the English language and written it with ease and elegance, yet I cannot recall one who has so completely absorbed our native idioms, who has made for himself an English soul (without losing his super-subtle Slavic soul), as has Joseph Conrad. He is unique as stylist. He first read English literature in Polish translations, then in the original; he read not only the Bible and Shakespeare, but Dickens, Fenimore Cooper, and Thackeray; above all, Dickens. He followed no regular course, just as he belongs to no school in art, except the school of humanity; for him there are no types, only humans. (He detests formulas and movements.) His sensibility, all Slavic, was stimulated by Dickens, who is the true creator of the so-called "Russian pity" which fairly honeycombs the works of Dostoïevsky.

There is no mistaking the influence of the English Bible on Conrad's prose style. He is saturated with its puissant, elemental rhythms, and his prose has its surge and undertow. That is why his is never a "painted ship on a painted ocean"; by the miracle of his art his water is billowy and undulating, his air quivers in the torrid sunshine, and across his skies—skies broken into new, strange patterns—the cloud-masses either float or else drive like a typhoon. His rhythmic sense is akin to Flaubert's, of whom Arthur Symons wrote: "He invents the rhythm of every sentence, he changes his cadence with every mood, or for the convenience of every fact; . . . he has no fixed prose tune." Nor, by the same token, has Conrad. He seldom indulges, as does Théophile Gautier, in the static paragraph. He is ever in modulation. There is ebb and flow in his sentences. A typical paragraph of his shows what might be called the sonata-form: an allegro, andante, and presto. For example, the opening pages of "Karain" in *Tales of Unrest*:

Sunshine gleams between the lines of those short paragraphs [he is writing of the newspaper accounts of various native risings in the Eastern Archipelago]—sunshine and the glitter of the sea. A strange name wakes up memories; the printed words scent the smoky atmosphere of to-day faintly, with the subtle and penetrating perfume as of land breezes breathing through the starlight of bygone nights; a signal fire gleams like a jewel on the high brow of a somber cliff; great trees, the advanced sentries of immense forests, stand watchful and still over sleeping stretches of open water; a line of white surf thunders on an empty beach, the shallow water foams on the reefs; and green islets scattered through the calm of noonday lie upon the level of a polished sea like a handful of emeralds on a buckler of steel.

There is no mistaking the *coda* of this paragraph, selected at random, beginning at "and"; it suggests the author of *Salammbô*, and it also contains within its fluid walls evocations of sound, odor, bulk, tactile values, the color of life, the wet of the waves, and the whisper of the wind. He has the cult of the cadence. Or, as a contrast, recall the rank ugliness of the night when Razumov visits the hideous tenement, expecting to find there the driver who would carry to freedom the political assassin, Haldin.

II

Invention he has to a plentiful degree, notwithstanding his giving it second place in comparison with imagina-

tion. His novels are the novels of ideas dear to Balzac, though tinged with romance—a Stendhal of the sea. Gustave Kahn called him *un puissant rêveur*, and might have added, a wonderful spinner of yarns. Such yarns—for men and women and children! At times yarning seemingly for the sake of yarning—true art-for-art, though not in the “precious” sense. From the brilliant glare of the East to the drab dirt of London’s mean streets, from the cool, darkened interiors of Malayan warehouses to the snow-covered *allées* of the Russian capital, or the green parks on the Lake of Geneva, he carries us on his magical carpet, and the key is always in true pitch. He never saves up for another book, as Mr. Brownell once said of Henry James, and for him, as for Mr. James, every good story is “both a picture and an idea”; he seeks to interpret “the uncomposed, unrounded look of life with its accidents, its broken rhythms.” He gets atmosphere in a phrase; a verbal nuance lifts the cover of some iniquitous or gentle soul. He contrives the illusion of time, and his characters are never at rest; even within the narrow compass of the short story they develop; they grow in evil or wisdom, are always transformed; they think in “character,” and an ideality unites his vision with that of his humans. Consider the decomposition of the moral life of Lord Jim and its slow recrudescence; there is a prolonged duel between the will and the intelligence. And the force of fatuity in the case of Almayer—a book which has for me the bloom of youth. Sheer narrative could go no further than in *The Nigger of Narcissus* (“Children of the Sea”), nor interior analysis in “The Return.”

What I once wrote of Henry James might be said of Joseph Conrad: “He is exquisitely aware of the presence of others.” And this awareness is illustrated in *Under Western Eyes* and *Nostromo*—the latter that astonishing rehabilitation of the humming life on a South American sea-board. For *Nostromo* nothing is lost save honor; he goes to his death loving insensately; for Razumov his honor endures till the pressure put upon it by his love for Haldin’s sister cracks it, and cracks, too, his reason. For once the novelist seems cruel to the pathological point—I mean in the punishment of Razumov by the hideous spy. I hope this does not betray parvitude of viewpoint. I am not thinskin, and *Under Western Eyes* is my favorite novel, but

the closing section is lacerating music for the nerves. And what a chapter!—that thunder-storm driving down the valley of the Rhône, the haggard, haunted face of the Russian student forced, despite his convictions, to become an informer and a supposed anarchist (curious students will find the first hint of the *leitmotiv* of this monumental book in *An Anarchist—A Set of Six*; as Gaspar Ruiz may be looked on as a pendant to Nostromo). But *Under Western Eyes* is a masterpiece of irony, observation, and pity. I once described it as being as powerful as Dostoiévsky and as well written as Turgenieff. The truth is it is Conrad at his best, although I know that I may give offense in seeming to slight the Eastern tales. It has the color and shape and gait of the marvelous stories of Dostoiévsky and Turgenieff—with an absolutely original motive, and more modern. A magical canvas!

Its type of narrative is in the later style of the writer. The events are related by an English teacher of languages in Geneva, based on the diary of Razumov. It is a favorite device of Conrad's, which might be described as, structurally, progressing from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous. His latest novel, *Chance*, is a specific instance of his intricate and elliptical method. Several personages of the story relate in almost fugal manner, the heroine appearing to us in flashes as if reflected by some revolving mirror. It is a difficult and elusive method, but it presents us with many facets of character and is swift and secular. The color is toned down, is more sober than the prose of the Eastern stories. Sometimes he employs the personal pronoun, and with what piquancy as well as poignancy may be noted in the volume *Youth*. This contains three tales, the first, which gives the title-key, has been called the finest short story in English, although it is difficult to discriminate. What could be more thrilling, with a well-nigh supernatural thrill (and the coloring of Baudelairian cruelty and blood-lust) than "The Heart of Darkness," or what more pathetic—a pathos that recalls Balzac's *Père Goriot* and Turgenieff's *A Lear of the Steppe*, withal still more pity-breeding—than "The End of the Tether"? This volume alone will place Conrad among the immortals.

That he must have had a "long foreground" we find after studying the man. Sailing a ship is no sinecure, and for Conrad a ship is something with human attributes. Like

a woman, it must be lived with to be understood, and it has its ways and whims and has to be petted or humored, as in "The Brute"—that monstrous personification. Like all true artists, Conrad never preaches. His morale is in suffusion, and who runs may read. We recognize his emotional caliber, which is of a dramatic intensity, though never over-emphasizing the morbid. Of his intellectual grasp there is no question. He possesses pathos, passion, sincerity, and humor. Wide knowledge of mankind and nature he has, and in the field of moral power we need but ask if he is a Yes-Sayer or a No-Sayer, as the Nietzscheans have it. He says Yes! to the universe and of the eternal verities he is cognizant. For him there is no "other side of good and evil." No writers of fiction, save the very greatest, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoïevsky, or Turgenieff, have so exposed the soul of man under the stress of sorrow, passion, anger, or as swimming, a midget, in the immensities of sky, or burrowing, a fugitive, in suffocating virgin forests. The soul and the sea—they are the beloved provinces of this sailor and psychologist. But he also recognizes the relativity of things. The ineluctable vastness and sadness of life oppresses him. In "Karain" we read: "Nothing could happen to him unless what happens to all—failure and death." His heroes are failures, as are heroes in all great poetry and fiction, and their failure is recorded with muffled irony. The fundamental pessimism of the Slavic temperament must be reckoned with. But this pessimism is implied, and life has its large as well as its "little ironies." In *Chance*, which describes the hypertrophy of a dolorous soul, he wrote:

It was one of those dewy, starry nights, oppressing our spirit, crushing our pride, by the brilliant evidence of the awful loneliness, of the hopeless, obscure magnificence of our globe lost in the splendid revelation of a glittering, soulless universe. . . . Daylight is friendly to man toiling under a sun which warms his heart; and cloudy, soft nights are more kindly to our littleness.

To match that one must go to Thomas Hardy, to the eloquent passage describing the terrors of infinite space in *Two on a Tower*. However, Conrad is not often given to such Hamlet-like moods. The shock and recoil of circumstances, the fatalities of chance, and the vagaries of human conduct intrigue his intention more than the night side of the soul.

III

It has been said that women do not admire him. This I have never been able to verify, but according to my limited experience I believe the contrary. (Where, indeed, would any novelist be if it were not for women!) He has said of Woman: "She is the active partner in the great adventure of humanity on earth and feels an interest in all its episodes." He does not idealize the sex, as did George Meredith, nor yet does he describe the baseness of the Eternal Simpleton, as do so many French novelists. He is not always complimentary: witness the portrait of Mrs. Fyne in *Chance*, or the mosaic of opinions to be found in that story. That he succeeded better with his men is a commonplace of all masculine writers, not that women always succeed with their sex, but to many masters of imaginative literature woman is usually a poet's evocation, not the creature of flesh and blood and bones, of sense and sentiment, that she is in real life. Conrad opens no new windows in her soul, but he has painted some full-length portraits and made many lifelike sketches, which are inevitable. From the shining presence of his mother, the assemblage of a few traits in his *Reminiscences*, to Flora de Barral in *Chance*, with her self-tortured temperament, you experience that "emotion of recognition" described by Mr. James. You know they live, that some of them go on marching in your memory after the book has been closed. Their actions always end by resembling their ideas. And their ideas are variegated.

In *Under Western Eyes* we encounter the lovely Natalie Haldin, a sister in spirit to Helena, to Lisa, to any one of the Turgenieff heroines. Charm is hers, and a valiant spirit. Her creator has not, thus far, succeeded in bettering her. Only once does he sound a false note. I find her speech a trifle rhetorical after she learns the facts in the case of Razumov (p. 354). Two lines are superfluous at the close of this heart-breaking chapter, and in all the length of the book that is the only flaw I can offer to hungry criticism. The revolutionary group at Geneva—the mysterious and vile Madame de S——, the unhappy slave, Tekla, the much-tried Mrs. Haldin, and the very vital anarchist, surely a portrait *sur le vif*, Sophia Antonovna, are testimonies of the writer's skill and profound divination of the human heart. (He has confessed that for him woman is "a human being, very much like myself.") The dialogue between

Razumov the spiritual bankrupt and Sophia in the park is one of those character-revealing episodes that are only real when handled by a supreme artist. As an etching of a vicious soul, the Eliza of *Chance* is arresting. We do not learn her last name, but we remember her brutal attack on little Flora, an attack that warped the poor child's nature. Whether the end of the book is justified is apart from my present purpose, which is chiefly exposition, though I feel that Captain Anthony is not tenderly treated. But "there is a Nemesis which overtakes generosity, too, like all the other imprudences of men who dare to be lawless and proud. . . ." And this sailor, the son of the selfish poet, Carleon Anthony, himself sensitive, but unselfish, paid for his considerate treatment of his wife Flora. Only Hardy could have treated the sex question with the same tact as Conrad (as he has done in *Jude the Obscure*). *The Duel* (published in America under the title of *A Point of Honor*) is a *tour de force* in story-telling that would have made envious Balzac. Then there is Winnie Verloc in the *Secret Agent*, and her cockney sentiment and rancors. She is remarkably "realized," and is a pitiful apparition at the close. The detective Verloc, her husband, wavers as a portrait between reality and melodrama. The minor female characters, her mother and the titled lady patron of the apostle Michaelis, are no mere supernumeraries.

The husband and wife in "The Return" are nameless, but hold your interest. The man discovered in his judgment of his foolish wife that "morality is not a method of happiness." Not always. The image in the mirrors in this tale produces a ghastly effect. I enjoyed the amateur anarchist, the English girl playing with bombs in "The Informer"; she is an admirable foil for the brooding bitterness of the ruined Royalist's daughter in that stirring South American tale, "Gaspar Ruiz." Conrad knows this continent of half-baked civilizations; life grows there like rank vegetations. *Nostromo* is the most elaborate and dramatic study of the sort, and a wildly adventurous romance into the bargain. The two women, fascinating Mrs. Gould and the proud, beautiful Antonia Avellanos, are finely contrasted. And what a mob of cut-throats, politicians, and visionaries! "In real revolutions the best characters do not come to the front," which statement holds as good in Paris as in St.

Petersburg, in New York, or in Mexico. Both *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *Nostromo* give us the "emotion of multitude."

A genuinely humorous woman is the German skipper's wife in "Falk," and the niece, the heroine who turns the head of the former cannibal of Falk—this an echo, doubtless, from the anecdote of the dog-eating granduncle B—— of the *Reminiscences*—is heroic in her way. Funniest of all is the captain himself. Falk is almost a tragic figure. Amy Foster—in the same volume—is pathetic, and Bessie Carvil, of "To-morrow," might have been signed by Hardy. In *Youth* the old sea-dog's motherly wife is the only woman. As for the impure witch in "The Heart of Darkness," I can only say that she creates a "new shudder." How she appeals to the imagination! The soft-spoken lady, bereft of her hero in this narrative, who lives in Brussels, is a specimen of Conrad's ability to make reverberate in our memory an enchanting personality, and with a few strokes of the brush. We cannot admire the daughter of poor old Captain Whalley in "The End of Tether," but she is the propulsive force of his actions and final tragedy. That particular story will rank with the best in the world's literature. Nina Almayer shows the atavistic "pull" of the soil and opposes finesse to force, while Alice Jacobus in "'Twixt Land and Sea" (*A Smile of Fortune*) is half-way on the road back to barbarism. But Nina will be happy with her chief. In depicting the slow decadence of character in mixed races and the naïve stammerings at the birth of their souls, Conrad is unapproachable.

His most buoyant and attractive girl is Freya Nelson (or Nielsen) in the volume alluded to; she, however, is pure Caucasian, and more American than European. Her beauty caresses the eye. The story is a good one, though it ends unhappily—another cause for complaint on the part of the sentimentalists who prefer molasses to meat. But this is fiction which is also literature. Conrad will never be coerced into offering his readers sugar-coated tittle-tattle. And at a period when the distaff of fiction is too often in the hands of men the voice of the romantic-realist and poetic ironist, Joseph Conrad sounds a dynamic masculine bass amid the shriller choir. Let us close with the hearty affirmation of Walt Whitman: "Camerado! this is no book, who touches this, touches a man."

JAMES HUNEKER.